Helping Others Cope with Trauma

The Authors:

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This manual is designed to be used as an individual study or as a facilitator guide to help pastors, ministers, and students in the local Bible Colleges or schools of ministry. The objective is to develop the skills to **Help Others Cope with Trauma**.

Introduction from the Authors:

This study guide was originally published following the Westgate Shopping Mall shooting in Nairobi, Kenya in September of 2013 that resulted in 71 deaths and approximately 200 people wounded. We wrote the study at the request of several pastors in the region that were struggling to help family and friends cope with the trauma and aftermath of this horrific event.

In light of recent events with the COVID-19 pandemic, mass shootings, terrorist attacks, political unrest, and natural disasters that have happened around the world, we thought it was relevant to update it and reshare it with you as a resource so that you are equipped to help your church and community members through this time of trauma and uncertainty.

Please understand this study guide (facilitator manual) is not intended to provide all the answers about trauma. It is simply a guide to begin a dialogue on what trauma is and some of the tools to help others cope with it.

Sadly, every individual is going to cope with trauma in their life, whether it is brought on by personal choices, the decisions of others, or natural events. However, our response to the trauma will affect our future and that of the individuals around us.

Our hope is that this information will give you the tools you need to minister in chaotic times, bringing the hope and love of Jesus to those who are struggling with big questions. If you need assistance or additional resources, feel free to contact us.

Blessings as You Study,

Dr. Don Allen & Rev. Ethan Allen

Trauma can be defined in two different ways:

The American Psychological Association defines trauma as:

"…an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, rape or natural disaster. Immediately after the event, shock and denial are typical. Longer term reactions include unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. While these feelings are normal, some people have difficulty moving on with their lives. Psychologists can help these individuals find constructive ways of managing their emotions."

C.S. Lewis wrote in his book The Problem of Pain:

"Mental pain is less dramatic than physical pain, but it is more common and also more hard to bear. The frequent attempt to conceal mental pain increases the burden: it is easier to say 'My tooth is aching' than to say 'My heart is broken'. Yet if the cause is accepted and faced, the conflict will strengthen and purify the character and in time the pain will usually pass. Sometimes, however, it persists and the effect is devastating; if the cause is not faced or not recognised, it produces the dreary state of the chronic neurotic. But some by heroism overcome even chronic mental pain. They often produce brilliant work and strengthen, harden, and sharpen their characters till they become like tempered steel."

For simplicity, we can define trauma as either physical or psychological:

- **Physical** trauma could be a body wound or shock produced by sudden physical injury, as from violence or accident.

- **Psychological** trauma is an experience that produces psychological (often referred to as emotional trauma) injury or pain.

Examples of psychological traumas are:

Unexpected tragedy:

- Abandonment or perceived abandonment by parents or other love ones.
- Act of Nature (flood, tornado, fire, etc.)
- Child being forcefully removed from a family environment.
- Forcible Sexual Assault (Rape)
- Robbery
- Shooting (either witnessing or being shot)
- War
- We find with children a major area of trauma from a parent (or parents) dying.

It is important to note that physical and psychological trauma are not mutually exclusive. They often go hand in hand, creating a cycle of trauma. An individual can suffer a physical injury, which causes emotional trauma due to loss of independence. The loss of independence leads to depression which keeps the person from exercising, leading to further physical trauma down the road. Circumstances that can add to the destructiveness of traumatic events are:

- **Lack of Preparedness.**
    - People are often caught off guard and have not planned for a crisis, leading to deeper trauma.

- **Lack of Support System.**
    - When someone does not have a solid support system to turn to in a crisis, trauma can be amplified by feelings of loneliness.

- **Repeated Occurrences**.
    - Trauma is further compounded when the crisis is ongoing, such as in the case of any type of abuse.

- **Childhood Events**.
    - Children are resilient, but childhood trauma can manifest itself throughout a persons lifetime, impacting future relationships.

Trauma Symptoms

Individuals that experience trauma may experience shock and denial. Over time, these emotional responses may fade, but a survivor may also experience long-term symptoms. These can include:

- Anger
- Persistent feelings of sadness and despair
- Flashbacks
- Unpredictable emotions
- Physical symptoms, such as nausea and headaches
- Intense feelings of guilt, as if they are somehow responsible for the event
- An altered sense of shame
- Feelings of isolation and hopelessness

Common thoughts or actions in attempting to cope with a traumatic event:

- **Denial/Unwillingness** at the present time to acknowledge the event was traumatic or even happened.

- **Shifting blame** to physical problems or health issue, in order to not have to cope with the traumatic memories of the experiences. The health problem or issues may be real or imaginary.

- **Self-Medicating** (using drugs or alcohol) in order to feel numb and avoid thinking about the emotional pain they are suffering from the traumatic events.

- **Withdrawal** (quitting the use of alcohol or drugs) which can play a major negative role in a person’s ability to cope with the trauma.

Help for physical trauma can be obvious and includes going to a doctor or hospital and getting treated injuries. However, further help may be needed to cope with loss of mobility or function. If a physically traumatic event does take place, we recommend referring the individual to a mental health professional to assess the potential for long term, emotional stress.

Regardless of the nature of the event, trauma is possible. It is our role as ministers and leaders to be aware of those whom God has entrusted us. We keep watch over our flocks and look out for those events that may cause them harm. If we see something occurring, there are things we can do to mitigate the trauma remind them of hope.

Skills for Responding to Other's Trauma:

Sadly, there is NO magic solution or method for helping others deal with the trauma they have experienced. As pastors, friends, and family, the following are four essentials that will help the individual throughout the sometimes long and often very painful process of healing:

1) **Listen**: Individuals that have experienced a traumatic event such as sexual assault, natural disaster, war, or other events, are looking for someone to listen, to hear, and to not pass judgment on their beliefs and feelings. Our role is to remain silent and allow them to verbally process the confusion and chaos in their minds. Listening well brings stability and clarity for the person.

2) **Remember cultural/family perspectives**: Understanding the culture and family of an individual will inform how you address the trauma. For example, some cultures are more communal, so when someone experiences a trauma like rape, that trauma may be amplified by family shaming and attitudes.

3) **Pray:** Most importantly we pray for them. We pray for three things: (1) God's peace overcoming their heart and mind as they walk with these painful memories. (2) God reveals himself to them as the Greater Healer (Great Physician and Wise Counselor) (3) God gives us the words that will help them walk through the pain and memories into a peaceful relationship with Christ.

4) **Challenge their thinking:** When appropriate, help them challenge their beliefs that the traumatic event was somehow their fault. Help them process the events, thinking about what, if anything, they could have done differently

5) **Encourage them to forgive themselves and others:** Ironically, many individuals believe that they are responsible for what happened, they asked for it, etc. We need to encourage them to forgive themselves and to accept God's forgiveness and love. When it is appropriate, forgiveness for the perpetrator of the event may also provide some closure and healing. This should not be forced in any way and should be approached with care and compassion.

Scripture that may help deal with the Trauma:

- Psalms 16; 23; 27; 30; 42:1-8; 46; 90; 103; 130; 118: 121; 130:8-18; 138; 139:1-14, 17-18.
- Isaiah 25:6-9 God will wipe away tears
- Isaiah 40:1-6, 8-11, 28-31 Comfort my people
- Isaiah 55:1-3, 6-13 Hear that your soul may live
- Isaiah 61:1-3 Bind up the broken hearted
- Lamentations 3:17-26, 31-33 The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases
- Luke 24: 13-35 The Lord has risen indeed
- John 6:35-40 I am the bread of life
- John 14: 1 – 6, 27. My peace I give to you
- Romans 8: 28, 31b –35, 37 – 39. If God is for us
- 1 Corinthians 15:1 – 28 Our resurrection
- 2 Corinthians 4: 16- 5:10 Living by faith
- Ephesians 1:15-23 Now that I have heard of your faith
- Ephesians 2:1. 4-10 From death to life
- Philippians 3:10-21 My one desire is to know Christ
- 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 We believe that Jesus died and rose again
- 2 Timothy 2:8-12a If we die with him, we shall live with him
- 1 John 3: 1-2 We are now God’s children
- I John 4:7-18a My dear friends, let us love one another
- Revelation 21:1-7 I saw a new heaven and a new earth

The Authors:

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Rev. Ethan Allen is the Founder/CEO of **Allen Continuity Solutions LLC**, where the vision is to prepare church leaders to continue the mission through education and strategy solutions. He also serves as a Housing Case Manager for the Salvation Army in Marysville, Ohio helping homeless families find and sustain housing. He has served as a lead pastor, associate pastor, and student ministry coordinator throughout his ministry career. He holds a Master of Management and a B.A. in Disaster Management & Relief from Ohio Christian University and is ordained for ministry through Logos Global Network.